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REPLY TO ADONIS FRANGESKOU'S RESPONSE

ANNA YAMPOLSKAYA

DSc in Philosophy.

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Centre for Fundamental Sociology.

105066 Moscow, Russia.

E-mail: iampolsk@gmail.com

This is my short reply to Adonis Frangeskou's response to my review of his book (2017). I offer a careful reading of the passage from Levinas quoted in Frangeskou's response. I discuss the idea of God-in-me in connection with the issues of sensibility, vulnerability, and suffering. I argue that interpreting Levinas within the framework of the analytics of the sublime is crucially important for the catastrophic dimension of Levinas' approach to subjectivity.

Key words: Levinas, Kant, God, sensibility, sublime, subjectivity.

ОТВЕТ НА ВОЗРАЖЕНИЯ АДОНИСА ФРАНГЕСКУ

АННА ЯМПОЛЬСКАЯ

Доктор философских наук.

Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая Школа Экономики», Центр фундаментальной социологии.

105066 Москва, Россия.

E-mail: iampolsk@gmail.com

Это мой краткий ответ на возражения Адониса Франгеску на мою рецензию его книги (2017). Я подробно разбираю фрагмент из Левинаса, который Франгеску использует, чтобы возразить мне, и обсуждаю, каким именно образом идея-Бога-во-мне связана с проблемами чувственности, ранимости и страдания. Я утверждаю, что рассмотрение философии Левинаса в контексте кантовской аналитики возвышенного совершенно необходимо, так как позволяет выявить катастрофическое измерение левинасовского подхода к субъективности.

Ключевые слова: Левинас, Кант, Бог, чувственность, возвышенное, субъективность.

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Let me begin by thanking Adonis Frangeskou for his careful reading of my review and for his thoughtful response to my critique. Below I briefly reply to his objections, which concern: (1) the role of sensibility, (2) the place of the *Third Critique* in Levinassian interpretation of Kant, (3) the idea of God in me as a regulative idea. I would like to take this opportunity to further develop some points raised in my review: Levinas' approach to God and sensibility.

I will start with the third objection which relates to the place of God in Levinas' thought. In his excellent book Adonis Frangeskou offers the reader a powerful and thought-provoking reading of the *First Critique* through Levinassian philosophy, and vice versa. In particular, he claims that problematics of temporality in Levinas can be grasped only within its connection to the Wholly Other, that is, that diachronic temporality needs to be read as "a peculiar openness toward God" (Frangeskou, 2017, 132) which is interpreted by Frangeskou in terms of the Kantian regulative idea. In his response to my review he claims that Levinas offers us a "transformative reading of the regulative idea of God as signifying the beyond being of God in diachrony." It is this interpretation of Levinas' relation to Kant that Frangeskou would like to oppose to my rendering of this situation that he energetically branded "too divisive," "conventional" and not subtle enough.

As far as one can see from the material Frangeskou himself uses, Levinas' stance towards Kant is ambiguous and undecisive. In his lecture on the January 16, 1976 he claims that Kantian idea of God is "a return to onto-theology," that Kant "keeps the idea that the ultimate meaning of a notion is in its being; he does not grant to the thinkable any other norm than that of being" (Levinas, 2000, 154–155, also quoted by Frangeskou). Frangeskou acknowledges that he played down Levinas' critique of the regulative idea of God, but should one follow his example? He insists that these "statements of intolerance" (made by Levinas, not by me) "conceal from us the potential of his thought" to perform the "ethical transformation of the [traditional] ontological categories." I would rather insist on the complexity of the situation as a whole: it appears that Levinas claims rights to the Kantian heritage and rejects it with the same gesture.

Let us take as an example the beautiful footnote from *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* concerning diachrony and 'as if' that Frangeskou discusses in his response. Frangeskou asks whether it should be read "conventionally," as a plain critique of the Kantian idea of God, or "more subtly," as its implicit vindication? He insists that

[Levinas] only criticizes the "as if" of the regulative idea of God in order to better reveal the transformation of its ontological significance as "*als ob*" into the ethical "as if" of the enigma of diachrony, thereby attesting to an enigmatic significance that marks their in-

extricable connection. (see above *Adonis Frangeskou's* Response to Anna Yampolskaya's Review..., p. 363)

I will try to offer a more stereoscopic approach to the same quotation. First of all, let us recall the conventional reading of this footnote. For example, Richard Cohen interprets it as an implicit polemic with Hans Vaihinger's *Die Philosophie des Als-Ob* (Vaihinger, 1911; Cohen, 1994, 272). Indeed, Vaihinger sees in Kant's regulative ideas of reason only useful "heuristic fictions;" such a reading of the 'as if' is far too restrictive for Levinas. So, it is the "conventional" reading that sees in this passage a defence of the regulative idea and not a critique; but it is quite clear from the context that it is a *certain* defence and not an attempt to fully appropriate Kantian way of thought or, indeed, his terminology.

Now let us look on the text more precisely; for the ease of reference I will quote it again without omissions made by Frangeskou:

"As if"—not the uncertainty or simple verisimilitude of the philosophies of the "*als ob*." The latter, despite their empirical prudence, remain attached to the truth-result, to the ideal identity of the objective, and, more generally, to the univocity of presence and of being. We hear in the "as if" the equivocation or the enigma of the nonphenomenon, the nonrepresentable: a witnessing, from before thematization, that attests a-"*more*"-awakening-a-"*less*"-which-it-disturbs-or-inspires, [which attests] the "idea of the Infinite," the "God in me"; and then, the non-sense of indecipherable trace, *tohu vavohu* [chaos, confusion] of the *il y a*. Nonsynchronizable diachrony, enigmatic significance and, only thus, signifying beyond being or God. (Levinas, 1982, 51; 1998, 190)

Levinas *hears* in the 'as if' of the Kantian regulative idea a 'witnessing' that attests the (apparently Cartesian) 'idea of the Infinite' as the idea of the Infinite-in-me; only in this context 'as if' could be understood as a diachrony 'signifying beyond being or [beyond] God,' '*signifiant au-delà de l'être ou de Dieu*' (Levinas, 1982, 51). Levinassian "as if" refers to the unthinkable that must be thought: "as if God could abide in me" (Levinas, 1982, 51; 1998, 26). This is why the 'enigma' of the 'God in me' takes us not only beyond Being, it takes us beyond God—that is, beyond all my possible ideas of God. The idea of the Infinite awakes, disturbs and thus transforms me; I am not able to grasp it as an idea, but only as this very awakening or, indeed, prophetic inspiration. I think that we may safely conclude that Levinas' diachronic 'idea of God' is no more Kantian than it is Cartesian; there is no doubt that Levinas is inspired here by certain motives in Kant and Descartes, but the 'significance' of their ideas is indeed 'effectively transformed' by his philosophy as a whole. The regulative idea of God as an idea "as if" is reinterpreted and accepted by Levinas, while the way Kant *determines* this idea is firmly rejected. This is why I cannot but repeat my previous claim that

Frangeskou is absolutely right when he emphasises the importance of the idea of God for Levinas' thought... but he is surprisingly deaf to Levinas' critique of the Kantian regulative idea of reason... Kant's attempts to ascribe some form of being to God is intolerable for Levinas. (Yampolskaya, 2018, 584)

This is my answer to the third objection.

Let us meditate on the same fragment a little longer. In no uncertain terms Levinas opposes this 'awakening' of the subject to Kantian 'vigilance'¹: while 'vigilance' is a 'remaining-the-same,' an invulnerability of the subject (Levinas, 1982, 36; 1998, 16), 'awakening' presupposes that the self is 'sobered up from its own identity' and becomes vulnerable, that is, exposed to the Other "in a form of a wound" (Levinas, 1982, 59; 1998, 31). This vulnerability is not just "passivity of inertia" but "sensibility: a pain that dazzles and burns" (Levinas, 1982, 59; 1998, 31). Indeed, Levinassian God comes to mind (*à l'idée*), but to the mind of the embodied and vulnerable subject who is concretely affected by the Other in the core of their sensibility. In other words, the analysis of diachrony in Levinas necessarily entails the implicit investigation of sensibility. Should I conclude from this that Frangeskou is formally right when he dismisses my claim that the problematics of sensibility are withdrawn beyond the framework of his book on the basis that he provided a detailed analysis of diachrony? But in his book there is no thematization of the exceptionally complex relation that exists between diachrony and sensibility/vulnerability, diachrony and double hetero-affectedness by the Other and by the Infinite; these notions are hardly even mentioned. Levinas dramatically reinvents the role of sensibility within the general economy of subjectivity: sensibility as vulnerability turns out to be the seat of responsibility and so constitutes a key feature of the ethical subject:

Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting of defeat of the ego's identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation. (Levinas, 1978, 85; 1981, 15)

Levinas' idea of God is primarily about the self, but inasmuch as this self is an embodied, vulnerable self, open to the non-sense of human suffering; this suffering is as "immense" and non-representable as the idea of God is "immense" and out of

¹ It is worth noting that Kantian "vigilance," or "lucidity," is not dismissed or reinterpreted in the "ethical terms" by Levinas; it has its proper place within the general economy of awakening as its "necessary" step (Levinas, 1982, 52; 1998, 26).

all proportions with the self that is affected by it (Levinas, 1978, 25; 1981, 11). The detailed analysis of suffering in Levinas goes far beyond the scope of this brief reply, however I would like to accentuate the close connection that exists between the idea of God, sensibility, and suffering. Sensibility for Levinas is not just a faculty of cognition; the sensible subject is a subject that is prone to suffering. In suffering the (pre-ethical) subject is crushed and then reinstated as the ethical, or rather, prophetic, subject. Suffering in itself does not make any sense, it cannot be assumed by the self and as such is able to overpower the self completely. The subject should take a risk to suffer “for nothing,” without any reason: “This moment of the ‘for nothing’ in suffering is the surplus of non-sense over sense by which the sense of suffering is possible” (Levinas, 1978, 186; 1981, 196). The suffering is senseless and violent, but this violence is “redeemed” by the Good (Levinas, 1978, 30–31; 1981, 15) that “neither sleeps nor slumbers” (Levinas, 1982, 114). This is why Levinas’ footnote on “as if,” discussed above, links “God in me” and the “non-sense of indecipherable trace:” my senseless suffering is “suffering ‘for God’ who suffers from my suffering” (Levinas, 1978, 186; 1981, 196) and only thus it could make sense. So, “God abiding in me” is not just an idea or even a regulative idea: it is the transcendence which “rends” the immanence, or rather tears the incarnated self into pieces (Levinas, 1982, 51; 1998, 26). The idea of God destabilises the self, stripping it from its self-identity, but then the self is also pulled together by their own prophetic, inspired response: *me voici*, here I am. As a prophetic subjectivity, I am irreplaceable and unique: my new identity is “an identity by pure election” (Levinas, 1978, 227; 1981, 145).

In his book Frangeskou provides the reader with a very subtle and original analysis of temporality in Levinas, but this subtlety cannot replace an explicit engagement with sensibility which is a fundamental dimension of Levinas’ thought. So I cannot take back my claim that the problematics of sensibility in Levinas are not sufficiently elaborated in Frangeskou’s book. This would be my answer to the first objection.

Finally, I will deal with the second objection. It is indeed Marc Richir’s interpretation of prophetism in Levinas as “the phenomenological ordeal of the sublime” (Richir, 1998, 178) that made me think of the *Third Critique*. I must admit that I am very fond of this interpretation although I cannot accept some of Richir’s most radical statements. Very much in line with the French tradition of interpretation of the *Third Critique* (Derrida, Lyotard), Richir sees in the sublime the moment where the irrepresentable is “presented” by the self. But he also stresses that the “trial of the sublime” presupposes the reflexive turn on myself: roughly speaking, instead of dealing with an overwhelming object, I turn to my own inability to represent it in imagination. The “presentation” in mind of what is irrepresentable by means of imagination, the move-

ment of self-transcendence vis-a-vis an overwhelming object, and the singularity of the self that is established as a result of this encounter: these are the key features of the sublime, and they are present in Levinas' account of prophetism. As Richir puts it, Levinas' philosophy of prophetism makes us face "something of the extraordinary and terrifying and of the sublime grandeur" (Richir, 1998, 179): prophecy is a way to confront the immensity and the non-phenomenality of God's call *and* the non-sense of unbearable suffering. I do believe that the idea of God and the ordeal of suffering represent the violent and catastrophic dimension of Levinas' thought that can indeed be addressed only in terms of the sublime (or the "ante-sublime," as it was done by Yasuhiko Murakami (2002, 205–206).

While I am happy to concede the point that the recourse to the *Third Critique* may not be strictly necessary for Frangeskou (as he explicitly confined his task to the "ethical interpretation" of the *First Critique*), still I would argue that it can be productive for a more daring interpretation of Levinas' thought in terms of Kantian philosophy. One of the most stimulating questions in Frangeskou's book is how "the threefold unity of time distinguishes itself from the pure synthesis of imagination" (Frangeskou, 2017, 185). A more basic question is: what holds diachronical temporality together? Given that diachrony cannot be synchronised, what is responsible for the synthetic unity of time? According to Frangeskou, the threefold unity of time, "the unity that separates" (Frangeskou, 2017, 162), is guaranteed by the transcendental schema of reason: it provides a *mediation* between reason and understanding, thus ordering a manifold of empirical cognition. However, this is not the only possible answer to this question.

The feeling of the sublime suspends the temporal structure of the subject; it no longer can be reduced to the temporal structure of the subject of cognition (cf. Lyotard, 1991, 37, 177–178). The experience of the sublime assembles the subject together in a way that differs from that of transcendental schematism. Richir's interpretation of Levinas in the framework of the analytic of the sublime highlights the "enigma" of the Levinasian subject whose unity is emerging from a catastrophe and whose individuation is not based on self-identification.

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